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NFL policy is about divide and conquer

David A. Grenardo, For the Express-News

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Photo: John Bazemore /Associated Press

Cleveland Browns owner Jimmy Haslam and NFL commissioner Roger Goodell announce that NFL team owners have reached agreement on a new league policy that requires players to stand for the national anthem or remain in the locker room. A policy that creates divisions for a football team could lead to divisions within the team that carry onto the field.

On the same day that the Milwaukee Police Department released video of police officers tasing a black NBA player — Sterling Brown of the Milwaukee Bucks — the NFL announced its policy requiring players and personnel on the field to stand for the national anthem while allowing players the option to remain in the locker room during “The Star-Spangled Banner.”

The NFL policy serves as a misguided attempt to appease team owners who want players to stand for the national anthem.

Why? Most likely to avoid negative fan reactions to player protests that may have affected their bottom lines. The policy also seeks to placate players who want to bring awareness to police brutality and racial injustices. The result of the policy will be a divided team whose players and personnel must choose between standing for the national anthem or remaining in the locker room as a form of protest.

Politics relies on divisions to provide and maintain support for the two major political parties in our country. Today, it seems as if every major topic in our country involves a schism between the parties — climate change, immigration, taxation, government regulation.

Politics, which thrives on divisions, found its way into the NFL national anthem debate last year when President Donald Trump called any player who disrespects the American flag by kneeling during the national anthem a “son of a (expletive).”

The new NFL policy, applauded by the president, includes fines for players or personnel who kneel or sit during the national anthem. Additionally, NFL teams will now be divided at the beginning of every game and likely through the week as reporters ask players questions such as, “Will you remain in the locker room?”

Without near-perfect and complete cohesion, particularly in football, a team cannot succeed. Unlike basketball, where one player can dominate a game on offense, football requires 11 individuals working together to accomplish a goal on every play.

A policy that on its face creates divisions for a football team could lead to divisions within the team that carry onto the field. Yes, these men are professionals and must do their jobs to the best of their abilities if they want to continue in the league, but we cannot ignore human nature and the chemistry required for a successful team.

How can teams remain together in the face of the NFL’s new anthem policy? New York Jets co-owner Christopher Johnson said that the organization will pay any fines assessed for players kneeling, and the Jets will not discipline any player who kneels during the national anthem, even though the new policy permits disciplinary repercussions from the team.

Johnson understands that the issue is complicated. One side views standing for the anthem as patriotic and a way to honor our military. The other side views kneeling for the anthem as just as patriotic because of our country’s history of peaceful protest when confronted with police brutality and racial inequality.

The national anthem and our flag represent the freedoms that Americans possess, which includes the freedom of speech and the freedom to stand up — or kneel — against injustices in our country, and those injustices are precisely the reason protests during the national anthem began.

On the same day that police brutality showered the headlines, the NFL announced its divisive anthem policy that was precipitated by NFL players raising awareness of racial injustices, including the use of unnecessary force on minorities by police. Politics, which often seeks to divide our country, invaded the NFL, and the policy itself may divide a team.

Teams, though, can follow the lead of the New York Jets by protecting players and keeping the entire team together. Even though politics often divide, a politician’s words do provide guidance in this moment. As Abraham Lincoln once said, “A house divided against itself cannot stand.”

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